

A Guide to ABRSM Exams

Focusing on all-round musicianship

ABRSM exams are *music* exams rather than instrumental or singing exams. Examiners assess the quality of the music-making, not how it's achieved. For this reason, we don't restrict examiners to assessing only their own instrument but require them to examine all instruments.

We've designed our [graded music exams](#) to motivate instrumental and singing students of all ages and a wide range of abilities. They're available at eight levels – Grades 1 to 8 – and provide:

- Progressive goals to aim for
- Recognition for achievement
- Carefully structured syllabus requirements
- One-to-one assessment by an expert professional
- An objective guide to a candidate's skills and progress.

There are no age restrictions and students can start with any grade or skip grades if they want to.

What's included in the exam?

To succeed in our exams, candidates need a combination of skills and understanding. Broadly, we assess:

- Performance skills through pieces or songs
- Technical skills through scales and arpeggios
- Notation skills through a sight-reading test
- Listening skills and musical perception through aural tests

How many marks are available?

Total marks in all individual Practical exams are 150.

- 100 marks are required to pass
- 120 marks are required to pass with merit
- 130 marks are required to pass with distinction

What are the benefits of playing **pieces**?

Musicians learn to play an instrument to explore and perform repertoire, which is why pieces are at the core of the exam – candidates are asked to present three at each grade. The syllabus repertoire is organised into three lists which explore different traditions and styles, dating from the Renaissance period to the present day.

Mastering the art of performing a wide range of music is an essential part of music learning. In preparing for ABRSM exams, you can choose from a broad list of pieces chosen for your grade, each presenting you with an opportunity to develop new skills. Choosing one piece from each list gives candidates the opportunity to play a balanced selection and demonstrate a range of skills. In many syllabuses, the pieces are broadly grouped into lists by the characteristics of the music.

Most of the pieces require an accompaniment, as interacting with other musicians is an important musical skill, but there are also opportunities to choose solo pieces and develop confidence with unaccompanied playing.

We hope that by offering this variety in the syllabus, candidates will find music that inspires them and that they enjoy learning and performing.

What happens in the exam?

For this section of the exam, candidates prepare and present three pieces or songs chosen from the relevant syllabus. Repertoire lists for each grade can be found in the [syllabus for your instrument](#).

Marking criteria

To find out how our examiners assess the pieces in your exam, see our [marking criteria](#).

What are the benefits of playing **sight-reading**?

Learning to sight-read helps you to develop quick recognition of keys and tonality, rhythm and common patterns of beats. It also helps you to learn to keep going even when you make mistakes, and work music out for yourself – which makes learning new pieces quicker and easier.

Being able to sight-read is a valuable skill. It enables you to explore new pieces with increased confidence. Good sight-reading skills offer the satisfaction of independent musical discovery, as notation on the page is more readily transformed into sound.

What happens in the exam?

In the sight-reading test, the examiner will give you a piece of music that you haven't previously seen. You'll be given up to half a minute in which to look through the music and, if you wish, try out any part of the test before you perform it for assessment. Details of specific sight-reading tests for each grade can be found in the [syllabus for your instrument](#).

When working towards this test, you should look slightly ahead, keep going at a manageable speed, ignore any slips and keep your nerve. It can be helpful to know that examiners rarely hear perfect attempts at these tests but will always appreciate evidence of the right approach, plus an awareness of key and time values that gradually increases with the grades.

Supporting resources

[Specimen Sight-Reading Tests](#) books are available for every instrument at every grade, which you might find useful when preparing. However, the example you'll be given in the exam will be a confidential test that you won't have seen before.

Our *Joining the Dots* series improves skills and builds confidence in sight-reading/sight-singing. You can purchase these from our [online shop](#) or from your [local retailer](#). For Piano exams Grades 1–5, see our [Sight-Reading Trainer app](#).

Marking

In each element of the exam, ABRSM operates the principle of marking from the required pass mark positively or negatively, rather than awarding marks by deduction from the maximum or addition from zero.

What are the benefits of learning scales and arpeggios?

Learning scales and arpeggios helps you to develop reliable muscle memory for common finger movements and improves your tone control across the full note range.

It helps you to develop your pitch and interval awareness, and become familiar with keys and their related patterns. It also helps to build an understanding of keys, giving you confidence when sight-reading, learning new pieces and performing.

You can develop many aspects of technique through scales practice, including:

- Familiarity with the physicality of your instrument or voice
- Articulation
- Tone
- Intonation

What happens in the exam?

All scales and arpeggios are played from memory in the exam. Examiners will usually ask for at least one type of scale/arpeggio required at each grade and aim to hear a balance of the articulation requirements. Details of scales and arpeggios requirements for each grade can be found in the [syllabus for your instrument](#).

Supporting resources

Scales and Arpeggios books are available for every instrument at every grade, which you might find useful when preparing. However, your scales and arpeggios must be performed by memory in the exam.

You can purchase these books from our [online shop](#) or from your [local retailer](#). For Piano and Violin exams Grades 1–5, see our [Scales Trainer app](#).

Marking

In each element of the exam, ABRSM operates the principle of marking from the required pass mark positively or negatively, rather than awarding marks by deduction from the maximum or addition from zero.

What are the benefits of aural tests?

Aural skills enable you to assess your own sound and balance with others, keep in time and play with a sense of rhythm and pulse. These skills also help you play in tune, develop your musical memory and spot any mistakes.

Listening lies at the heart of all good music-making. Developing aural awareness is fundamental to musical training because having a ‘musical ear’ impacts on all aspects of musicianship. Singing, both silently in the head and out loud, is one of the best ways to develop the ‘musical ear’.

Developing good aural skills is an important part of any music education, and the ability to hear how music works helps students with all aspects of their learning.

What happens in the exam?

Aural tests are administered by the examiner from the piano. They are the same for all instruments, use the same group of tests, and are carefully graded from basic recognition of rhythm and memory of short phrases to tests demanding well-developed aural perception and discrimination. The pass mark is 12 and the maximum mark is 18.

For any test that requires a sung response, pitch rather than vocal quality is assessed. The examiner will be happy to adapt to your vocal range, and you can sing to any vowel (or consonant followed by a vowel), hum or whistle, and at a different octave if appropriate.

Marking

In each element of the exam, ABRSM operates the principle of marking from the required pass mark positively or negatively rather than awarding marks by deduction from the maximum or addition from zero.

Supporting resources

With your teacher, you might like to work through our [Specimen Aural Tests](#) and [Aural Training in Practice](#) books. To develop your skills independently, see our [Aural Trainer app](#).

Pieces	Pitch	Time	Tone	Shape	Performance
Distinction 27–30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly accurate notes and intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fluent, with flexibility where appropriate Rhythmic character well conveyed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well projected Sensitive use of tonal qualities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressive, idiomatic musical shaping and detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assured Fully committed Vivid communication of character and style
Merit 24–26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Largely accurate notes and intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustained, effective tempo Good sense of rhythm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly controlled and consistent Good tonal awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear musical shaping, well-realised detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive Carrying musical conviction Character and style communicated
Pass 20-23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally correct notes Sufficiently reliable intonation to maintain tonality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suitable tempo Generally stable pulse Overall rhythmic accuracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally reliable Adequate tonal awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some realisation of musical shape and/or detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally secure, prompt recovery from slips Some musical involvement
Below Pass 17-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequent note errors Insufficiently reliable intonation to maintain tonality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unsuitable and/or uncontrolled tempo Irregular pulse Inaccurate rhythm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uneven and/or unreliable Inadequate tonal awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical shape and detail insufficiently conveyed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insecure, inadequate recovery from slips Insufficient musical involvement
13-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Largely inaccurate notes and/or intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Erratic tempo and/or pulse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serious lack of tonal control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical shape and detail largely unrealised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacking continuity No musical involvement
10-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly inaccurate notes and/or intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incoherent tempo and/or pulse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No tonal control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No shape or detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unable to continue for more than a short section
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered

	Scales and arpeggios	Sight-reading*
Distinction 19–21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly accurate notes/pitch • Fluent and rhythmic • Musically shaped • Confident response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluent, rhythmically accurate • Accurate notes/pitch/key • Musical detail realised • Confident presentation
Merit 17–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largely accurate notes/pitch • Mostly regular flow • Mainly even tone • Secure response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate tempo, usually steady pulse • Mainly correct rhythm • Largely correct notes/pitch/key • Largely secure presentation
Pass 14-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally correct notes/pitch, despite errors • Continuity generally maintained • Generally reliable tone • Cautious response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuity generally maintained • Note values mostly realised • Pitch outlines in place, despite errors • Cautious presentation
Below Pass 11-13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent errors in notes and/or pitch • Lacking continuity and/or some items incomplete • Unreliable tone • Uncertain response and/or some items not attempted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking overall continuity • Incorrect note values • Very approximate notes/pitch/key • Insecure presentation
7-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very approximate notes and/or pitch • Sporadic and/or frequently incomplete • Serious lack of tonal control • Very uncertain response and/or several items not attempted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No continuity or incomplete • Note values unrealised • Pitch outlines absent • Very uncertain presentation
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No work offered

Mark	Aural tests
Distinction 17–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accurate throughout • Musically perceptive • Confident response
Merit 15–16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses • Musically aware • Secure response
Pass 12-14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths just outweigh weaknesses • Cautious response
Below Pass 9-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaknesses outweigh strengths • Uncertain response
6-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inaccuracy throughout • Vague response
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No work offered